

emotional, even visceral, overtones. Physiological terms are invoked to describe moments of intellectual discovery or major breakthroughs in skill development. Learners talk of getting chills as they stumble across a piece of knowledge that puts everything into perspective or of painful knots of anxiety forming in their stomachs as they fall short of self-imposed or teacher-prescribed standards. Some of the most emotionally laden themes are those concerned with self-doubts that are universally felt but rarely articulated. Students talk of feeling like an impostor, of committing cultural suicide, of losing the innocent belief that teachers have all the answers, and of regularly falling into demoralizing troughs of lost momentum. It is crucial for teachers to know how the emotional rhythms of these periods of self-doubts are experienced because left untreated they may well end with the learner deciding she can no longer continue her journey. These emotions are silent killers of student engagement, a kind of pedagogic hypertension. On the surface students appear fine, yet internally they are experiencing emotions that can end their careers as learners. This chapter explores these emotions and considers how teachers might respond to them.

### Impostorship

Impostorship is the sense learners report that at some deeply embedded level they possess neither the talent nor the right to become college students. Students who feel like impostors imagine that they are constantly on the verge of being found out, of being revealed as being too dumb or unprepared for college-level learning. The secret they carry around inside them is that they don't deserve to be students because they lack the intelligence or confidence to succeed. They imagine that once this secret is discovered they will be asked to leave whatever program they're enrolled in, covered in a cloud of public shame, humiliation, and embarrassment. Each week that passes without this event happening only serves to increase the sense that a dramatic unmasking lies just around the corner.

"Surely," the student asks herself, "sooner or later someone, somewhere is going to realize that letting me onto this campus was a big mistake. I'm not smart enough to succeed."

Not all share this feeling, it is true, but it does seem to cross lines of gender, class, and ethnicity. It is also felt at all levels, from developmental, remedial learners to participants in doctoral seminars. For example, Simon (1992) writes that when his doctoral students (who are mostly working teachers) read theoretical literature in education and its allied fields it often induces in them feelings of impostorship. The student decides "that one does not belong in this class; that one does not belong in graduate school; that one is not as smart as others think; that one is not really an 'intellectual'; that one is not as well read as one should be" (p. 85). When I spent a semester as a visiting professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education, it was striking to me how much like an impostor I felt. Me, a Harvard professor? They must have confused this Stephen Brookfield with some other Stephen Brookfield who actually deserved the position. What was even more striking was how strongly so many of the students (all master's and doctoral candidates at a premier Ivy League school) acknowledged their own feelings of impostorship once I had introduced this concept to them. Whenever I face a class full of seemingly confident new students, I have to keep telling myself that many of them are probably smitten with impostorship.

The psychological and cultural roots framing impostorship are hard to disentangle, but most who speak about it view it as having been produced by their awareness of the distance between the idealized images of omniscient intellectuals they attach to anyone occupying the role of "student" and their own daily sense of themselves as stumbling and struggling survivors. This distance between the idealized image of a student and the actuality of their own lives is so great that they believe it can never be bridged. With older students this feeling is compounded by their believing that their intellectual muscles have atrophied for lack of use. Not having written an essay for years, they feel they have lost the ability

to do this ever again. Taking a closed book exam fills them with blinding panic.

The triggers that induce impostorship are remarkably predictable. One is the moment of being publicly defined as a student. Gardella, Candales, and Ricardo-Rivera (2005) are typical when they write of the Latino/Latina adults they studied that "deciding to go to college was itself a developmental crisis that challenged assumptions, expectations, and beliefs" (p. 43). The news that one has been admitted into an educational program is greeted by many applicants with a sense of disbelief, not entirely pleasurable. Perhaps the admissions letter was a fraud, a trick played by an enemy determined to find new ways to humiliate us. Perhaps there has been a bureaucratic error in the admissions office whereby someone with the same last name as ours but a different middle initial has received the letter of rejection that was really intended for us. When students finally get to their first classes, their sense of impostorship is compounded by teachers asking all the participants to introduce themselves at the opening session and to talk about their previous experiences, current interests, and deepest enthusiasms. Teachers do this as a way of relieving students' anxieties and making them feel welcome. But this practice often seems to have the converse effect of heightening anxieties for many students. Rather than affirming and honoring their prior experiences, this roundtable recitation of past activities, current responsibilities, and future dreams serves only to convince such learners that everyone else in the class will make it while she'll be the one person who just won't get it.

College teachers then ratchet up these feelings of impostorship to an almost unbearable level by telling students that they have to think critically about the subject matter they are studying. Many students feel a reverence for what they define as "expert" knowledge enshrined in professors' heads and academic publications. Being asked to undertake a critical analysis of ideas propounded by people seen as experts smacks of temerity and impertinence to them. They report that their own experience is so limited that it gives

them no starting point from which to build an academic critique of major figures in their fields of study. There is a kind of steamroller effect in which the status of "theorist" or "major figure" flattens these students' fledgling critical antennae. This flattening is perhaps most evident when the figures being critiqued are heroic in their eyes, but it is also evident when students are faced with a piece of work in which the bibliographic scholarship is seen as impressive. Engaging in critical analysis seems a rather unconvincing form of role taking, even playacting, to them. They assume that sooner or later any critique they produce will be revealed to be the product of an unqualified and unfit mind.

It is not just students who feel like impostors: teachers often feel this way too. They feel that they don't really deserve to be taken seriously as competent professionals because they know that they're doing their best to muddle through the day, week, or semester without falling flat on their faces. The one thing they're certain of is that unless they're very careful they will be found out to be teaching under false pretences. Sometimes teachers' feelings of impostorship are communicated to students, inducing in them an unnecessary anxiety and level of mistrust or doubt. For example, Brems, Baldwin, Davis, and Namyniuk (1994) reported that teachers without self-reported feelings of impostorship were viewed more favorably by students.

Teachers smitten by impostorship have the conviction that they don't really merit any professional recognition or acclaim that comes their way. Kets de Vries (1993, p. 129) summarizes their feelings as follows:

These people have an abiding feeling that they have fooled everyone and are not as competent and intelligent as others think they are. They attribute their success to good luck, compensatory hard work, or superficial factors such as physical attractiveness and likeability. Some are incredibly hardworking, always over-prepared. However, they are unable to accept that they have intellectual gifts

and ability. They live in constant fear that their imposturous existence will be exposed—that they will not be able to measure up to others' expectations and that catastrophe will follow.

The presentation of the false face of confidence that impostorship entails is usually done for reasons of survival. We believe that if we appear incompetent then our students, colleagues, and administrative superiors will eat us alive. We think too that admitting frailty will be interpreted as a sign of failure. As Clark (1992) comments, "Asking for help makes us feel vulnerable—vulnerable to being discovered as imposters who don't know as much as we pretend to know" (p. 82). After all, we know that colleges don't generally reward those who appear unable to control what's going on in their classes. How many "Teacher of the Year" awards go to teachers who admit to struggling—sometimes unsuccessfully—to make sense of, and respond to, the chaos they encounter in their practice?

Impostorship means that many of us go through our teaching lives fearing that at some unspecified point in the future we will undergo a humiliating public unveiling. We wear an external mask of control, but beneath it we know that really we are frail figures, struggling not to appear totally incompetent to those around us. There is the sense that around the corner is an unforeseen but cataclysmic event that will reveal us as frauds. When this event happens we imagine that our colleagues' jaws will drop in synchronization. With their collective mouths agape, they will wonder out loud "How could we possibly have been so stupid as to hire this obvious incompetent in the first place?" We anticipate the pedagogic equivalent of a military court-martial in which our epaulettes of rank are ceremoniously and publicly ripped from our shoulders. Perhaps our mortarboards or diplomas will be taken away. Or, horror of horrors, our overheads or CD PowerPoint presentations will be removed, never to be returned.

Following this book's admonition constantly to examine how students experience our classrooms also heightens considerably the

chances of our feeling like impostors. Asking our students what they think of us carries with it the risk that they will tell us what we already think but have hidden from others—that we're incompetent. Anyone who reacts to students' evaluations of their teaching by ascribing great significance to negative comments and discounting positive ratings is displaying impostorship. For example, if ninety-eight out of one hundred students give me terrific evaluations, I usually infer that the people who praised me are operating at a lower level of critical discrimination and insight than the two who said I stank. I decide that these two are the most sophisticated in the class and have caught my pedagogical soul. They've seen through my facade and realized I don't really know what I'm doing.

Feelings of impostorship also accompany most attempts at pedagogic experimentation that spring from reflecting on students' CIQ data. Any time we depart from comfortable ways of acting or thinking to experiment with a new way of teaching, we are almost bound to be taken by surprise. The further we travel from our habitual practices, the more we run the risk of looking foolish. The moments of failure that inevitably accompany change and experimentation increase the sense of impostorship by emphasizing how little we can predict and control the consequences of our actions. In the midst of experimentation gone wrong, it is not uncommon for teachers to resolve never again to put themselves through the experience of looking foolish in front of students while trying desperately to conceal the fact that they don't really know what they're doing.

### Dealing with Impostorship

How can this feeling of impostorship be kept under control for students and teachers? The response for both groups is the same—make the phenomenon public. Once impostorship is named as an everyday experience, it loses much of its power. It becomes commonplace and quotidian rather than a shameful, malevolent secret. To hear someone you admire talking graphically and convincingly about their own regular moments of impostorship is enormously

reassuring. If they feel exactly the way you do, you conclude, then perhaps you're not so bad after all. In public forums and private conversations, teachers who are acclaimed as successful can do a great deal to defuse the worst effects of impostorship by admitting to its reality in their lives.

Students who feel like impostors usually don't realize that this feeling is universal rather than idiosyncratic. However, once one student talks about her own sense of impostorship, there is a domino-like effect, as, one by one, many of the other learners in the class admit to this feeling. This is why it's so important for teachers to name impostorship early on in a course. A teacher can talk about her own feelings of impostorship both as student and teacher. In line with the advice concerning personhood given in the previous chapter, teachers can share stories of how they dealt with their own impostorship as they faced the struggle to learn for the first time what they are asking their own students to learn. Even more dramatically, perhaps, a teacher can start the course off by arranging for a panel of former students to visit the class and pass on their best advice on how to succeed in the course. Almost inevitably the former students will speak about the feelings of impostorship they felt on the first day of class. Each of them will likely say they felt that they would be the only one who wouldn't make it to the end of the semester, that everyone else in the class was much smarter than they, that they felt they didn't really deserve to be there, and so on. As the new students hear the former students say these things, you can see smiles of recognition break out and feel a palpable release of tension as the new students recognize their own anxieties and perceptions in these words.

As far as teachers are concerned, being involved in team or peer teaching makes us less prone to being smitten by impostorship. When you teach a class with one or two colleagues, you have built-in reflective mirrors available to you. As you walk across campus after what you think is a bad session and you start to engage in your usual enthusiastic bout of self-flagellation, your colleagues are likely to

point out to you the things that went well. They will tell you about the situations you handled confidently and how impressed they were with your abilities. They will provide you with immediate multiple perspectives on events that you have only seen one way and suggest readings of students' actions that would never have occurred to you.

Impostorship can, however, ruin students' and teachers' lives. Taken to extreme levels it is crippling. The worst way to live as a student or teacher is to believe that you are the only one who is falling far short of the perfection that you suspect is exemplified by your fellow learners or colleagues. Few of us are strong enough to continue learning or working if we are burdened with the sense that those around us are paragons of virtue while we are incompetent amateurs struggling to keep intact a false mask of command. The sense of aloneness this induces is almost impossible to bear.

For teachers, however, a degree of impostorship is not totally negative. Indeed, properly controlled it can be productively troubling. It stops us from becoming complacent and ensures that we see our practice as being in constant flux and evolution. Teachers who remain completely free of all and any feelings of impostorship may well be teachers who have an unrealistically developed sense of confidence in their own perfectibility. Never to feel humbled in the presence of students or colleagues can betoken an unhealthy streak of arrogance or a well-developed capacity for denial. Additionally, any teacher who steps into a faculty or staff development role needs the humility born of an awareness of her own impostorship. If teachers pick up a whiff of presumed superiority in a staff developer, that person may as well pack up and go home. For students, however, impostorship is disastrous, a strong but unacknowledged cause of student attrition. It is vital that they know early in their studies that this feeling is normal, universal, and predictable. Once it is named this feeling does not disappear, but it loses some of its power to torpedo learner confidence. Left unnamed it is the elephant in the room, the silent assassin of student engagement and motivation.